

Liberal Democrat History Group

Newsletter Number Two

February 1994

The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP.

We aim to fulfil this objective by organising discussion meetings, by spreading knowledge of historical reference sources, by assisting in the publication of studies of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties, and by publishing this Newsletter. The Newsletter is free to all members, and includes up to date news of our planned activities.

Contributions - letters, articles, and, especially, book reviews - are invited. If they are intended for publication, please type them and, if possible, send them on disc (any programme, but only 3.5" discs, please). The deadline for the next issue is 12 May 1994; contributions should be sent to **Duncan Brack**, Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, Streatham, London SW16 2EQ

The History Group is run by an informal committee, which will meet roughly once every three months. Any member of the Group is very welcome to attend a committee meeting and contribute thoughts and suggestions. The next two take place at 6.30pm on **Thursday 12 May**, and then on **Thursday 8 September**, in the Meetings Room in Party HQ (4 Cowley Street, London SW1 - nearest tubes Westminster and St James Park).

Membership of the History Group costs £5.00; cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group' and sent to **Patrick Mitchell**, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.

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Cardiff Conference Fringe Meeting

Old Heroes for a New Party

Speakers: Gordon Lishman, Richard Holme and Robert Maclennan MP.

Chair: Cllr Sarah Ludford

Which of the great philosophers and thinkers of the past have most to offer the Liberal Democrats today? Whose influences can be discerned in Party principles and policies? Leading Party figures defend their choice.

*Friday 11 March 8.45 - 10.15pm
Meeting Rooms 1/2, Forte Crest Hotel, Cardiff*

Witness Seminar

The idea of a 'witness seminar' is to discuss historical events with actual participants in them. The History Group is planning the first of a series with a seminar to discuss the origins of community politics in the 1960s and '70s. Speakers will include Gordon Lishman, and one other still to be confirmed.

The venue will be Kettner's Restaurant, Romilly Street, Soho, London, and the time 7.00 for 7.30pm; the audience will be welcome to eat in the restaurant afterwards. The date is still to be arranged, but will provisionally be 14 June. Further details will be mailed to all History Group members. The seminar is being organised with the kind cooperation of LINK.

We hope to organise another in December, should the first one prove successful. Ideas for topics and speakers are very welcome; send to **Duncan Brack**.

Brighton Conference

Fringe

We are in the first stages of planning our fringe meeting for the autumn conference in Brighton in September. The provisional topic is the Yellow Book, and Lloyd George's programme for conquering unemployment in the 1920s. With one of the major policy paper debates at Brighton being on Employment Policy, this provides us with a chance to trace the development of Liberal/Lib Dem thought on this important topic.

Speakers have yet to be invited; any suggestions would be very welcome, and should be sent to **Duncan Brack**.

Mediawatch

Richard Grayson is responsible for maintaining and updating a bibliography of articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers and some magazines and journals (all those listed in the *British Humanities Index*, published by Bowker-Saur). Starting in 1988, this list now extends to six pages, and should be of use to any serious student of the Party. Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy free of charge; send a large (at least A5) SSAE to **Duncan Brack**. The current issue extends to 30 June 1993.

Book Review

John Stevenson: *Third Party Politics Since 1945: Liberals, Alliance and Liberal Democrats*
(Blackwell, 1993, pbk, £9.99)

Reviewed by James Lund

The author is a Fellow and Tutor in History at Worcester College, Oxford. His book is a contribution to a series entitled 'Making Contemporary Britain'. This suggests that the continuum of human transaction which gives rise to history through the study of evidences is a proceeding of fabrication and not an enactment. The series may have set its mark on the book,

which is a short historical handbook, briskly, clearly and competently written, seemingly intended for party activists. Its title states its scope, the fortunes of the third party in British politics from the end of the Second World War to the present day, and its metamorphoses as a party in that period. This story is preceded by an account of the decline of the Liberal Party during and after the First World War.

Between 1945 and the present day we proceed from general election to general election with intervening analyses of the results and summaries of changes in the political situation in the in-between years. What the story ultimately shows at the parliamentary level is that the fortunes of the Liberal Party, the Alliance and the Liberal Democrats "*can be shown to have been dependent in large part upon the state of the other parties*". Stevenson carefully qualifies this conclusion in a number of directions, notably the establishment of the third-party presence in local government as creating "*an apparently permanent power base in local government in both rural and urban areas*". At parliamentary level, however, an increasingly volatile electorate has steadily shown that the cause of Liberal Democracy, as it has become, cannot, as things are, muster more than 25% at best of the votes cast; and that those votes are spread so evenly through the constituencies that they produce a very limited return in seats. In 1992 it took "*almost 300,000 votes to elect each Liberal Democrat MP compared with just over 40,000 for each Labour and Conservative member*".

In these circumstances, the Liberal Democrats look to both electoral reform and the recovery of major party status. Stevenson's review of Liberal decline from 1906 to 1955 is in a way a reminder of the latter possibility. But his book is so conceived and structured that it does not allow for any developed historical understanding of that decline and of what has happened since then which would explain the failure of the Party to establish a strong, distinct and sufficiently attractive identity at Parliamentary level to convert protest votes against the government of the day into a more enduring following. History proper ought to afford more perspective than this book does. The point involved is too large a one to

develop here, but two important omissions indicate what is meant. Nothing is said about what Liberalism and the Liberal Party came to represent in its short Parliamentary heyday from 1859 to 1916, so that in the end the book leaves the subject obscure. And reference to the wider world in which all this took place is quite minimal. Nothing is said, for instance, about the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 on Liberal political opinion in Britain after the First World War, and the retreat which this great event stimulated in the politics of defensive class interest as represented both by Conservatives and Labour. A further consequence was to leave the conversion of the Liberal Party to social reform before 1914 incomplete. Arguably, among a significant minority of Liberal Democrats today, that conversion is still incomplete, and the Party has limited appeal among the industrial working class.

Book Review

H.C.G. Matthew: *Gladstone 1809 - 1874*
(OUP 1988 pbk £12.95)

Reviewed by Tony Little

Was Gladstone the Thatcher of the 19th century? Both came from commercial families whose fathers were active politicians and both went to Oxford. After a flirtation with the law, they chose politics as a career, joining the Conservative party. Their strong emotional links with sections of the working population, through their mastery of the press, intensified the distrust and loathing with which they were regarded by the Establishment including many of their own party, even cabinet colleagues. Retrenchment of government spending to cut income tax and allow wealth to fructify in the pockets of the population was their key economic policy. Free trade and nationalism were articles of faith and both acted as if they alone pursued the moral course which served to infuriate their opponents. They were masters of detail which allowed them to dominate cabinet and set the agenda for their generation. Gladstone was undoubtedly the better European and his trade union reforms were aimed at increasing rather than

reducing the power of the working class. Above all he trusted the people and that is perhaps why he created the Liberal Party and she led the Tories.

Matthew's book surveys only the period up to the end of the first premiership. Gladstone first accepted political office in the 1830s; he was in Peel's cabinet which repealed the Corn Law. Although he thought he had retired in 1874, Gladstone won his last election in 1892. The essay also betrays its origins as introductory remarks to the Gladstone Diaries which Matthew edited for publication. Yet this is what gives the volume its greatest strength. It presents Gladstone the human, rather than Gladstone the superman. He even opens up the secrets of Gladstone's sexual life in a way which almost, if not quite, strengthens our admiration. The 'Sun' would not have let The People's Willy get away with such innocent but doubtful self torture today.

Matthew brings out clearly the influence of Peel on Gladstone the Chancellor but underplays that of Aberdeen who prevented him rejoining the Tories. Gladstone's work at the Exchequer was crucial to the adaptation of the British political system to the realities of the Industrial Revolution. In making Britain a free trade nation, he completed Peel's work and constructed a tax system which removed the grievances of the working and commercial classes but which was acceptable to the aristocrats who controlled Parliament. He eliminated the obstacles to a cheap press and benefited from its hunger for news. He was the first senior politician to use the large, and reported, public meeting which, like Reagan, allowed him to appeal to the people over the head of the legislature.

Religion is the key to Gladstone. From an evangelical background, he was caught up in Oxford's attempt to revive the Church of England. He saw the state as an arm of the church but the failure of the Church and State to meet his ideals generated the tensions which drove him into the Exchequer, disestablished the Church of Ireland and created the misunderstanding between Gladstone and his non-conformist followers over education, condemning the Liberals to electoral defeat in 1874. Matthew's extensive coverage of religious issues may deter some readers. If so,

some judicious skipping in chapters 2 - 4 would still allow the reader to keep pace with the main political achievements.

All Liberal Democrats should read at least one life of Gladstone, the economic agenda he tackled is still with us, as are the problems he left unsolved in Bulgaria and Ireland. Matthew gives the best available insight into Gladstone, the man and politician.

Gladstone: Further Reading

The following very brief list is merely a starting point. Most of the works listed have their own much more extensive bibliographies for the enthusiast.

Published Sources

The Gladstone Diaries: Many Volumes: Edited by MRD Foot & HCG Matthew
Detailed abbreviated daily doings. A feast for experts and aficionados but very heavy going for the rest of us.

The Political Correspondence of Mr. Gladstone & Ld. Granville: 4 vols.: Ed. A Ramm
Granville was Gladstone's closest political confidant and friend.

The Prime Minister's Papers: W E Gladstone: 4 vols.: Ed. J Brooke & M Sorenson
Memos, mostly autobiographical, kept by Gladstone, for the record.

Gladstone's Speeches: Ed. A Tilney Bassett
14 key speeches covering 535 pages plus an 84 page list of all the major speeches!

The Red Earl, The Papers of the 5th Earl Spencer 1835-1910: 2 vols.: Ed. P Gordon
Princess Di's ancestor was a Gladstonian Cabinet Minister; an insider's view.

Background

Nineteenth Century Britain: A Wood
A standard 'A' level textbook

Politics Without Democracy : M Bentley
Inexpensive paperback which gives a brisk survey of the period with added perspective.

The Palliser Novels: 6 vols.: A Trollope
Capture the mood, mores and something of the principal personalities.

The Crisis of Imperialism 1865-1915: R Shannon
Thought provoking, poses the problems faced by successive governments and their answers to them.

The Optimists, Themes and Personalities in Victorian Politics: I Bradley
How the, sometimes contradictory, ideas which make up Liberal politics came together.

Biography

Life of Gladstone: 2/3 vols.: J Morley
Still the unreplaced classic but it lacks the personal insights and 'warts' expected of a modern life.

Gladstone 1809-1865: R Shannon
A competitor to Matthew on the early career. Long and detailed but not without humour. Where is volume 2?

Disraeli: R Blake
Gladstone's chief competitor and antithesis. Infinitely preferable to the gossipy new biography by S Weintraub.

Robert Peel: 2 vols.: N Gash
Peel was Gladstone's first ministerial employer and the mentor who inspired the rest of his career.

Politics

McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book 1832-1918: Ed. J Vincent & M Stenton
The election results for every parliamentary constituency over the period, the psephologist's delight.

Elections and Party Management: H J Hanham
Political organisation and campaigning in the good old days before central organisation and Focus.

A Diary of Two Parliaments: 2 vols.: H W Lucy
How the Punch sketch writer viewed the party combat; naturally stronger on personalities than issues.

Book Review

The Launch of the SDP 1979-1981
Report of witness seminar in *Contemporary Record*, Vol 7, autumn 1993, No. 2

Reviewed by Malcolm Baines

(A witness seminar is an exercise in oral history at which participants in events are gathered together and invited to discuss them before an audience.)

This seminar forms part of a series of articles in the same volume discussing the history of the organised Labour right from the 1960s to the present. The discussion includes individuals from both wings of the SDP, including some such as Roger Liddle, Alec McGivan and Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler who are still active in the Liberal Democrats.

The participants began by discussing the origins of the SDP and agreed that it revolved around the three key issues of Europe, unilateralism and constitutional change within the Labour Party, where later Social Democrats took a view distinct from that of the Labour mainstream. That these issues defined the views of many leading Social Democrats is itself significant in the light of later conflicts within the Alliance and the Liberal Democrats.

The seminar also raised, if it did not resolve, those questions which are likely to be addressed by future historians of the SDP. Should the SDP have competed with the Liberal Party or should it have fought them at the ballot box? Was there genuinely a 'window of opportunity' for a new third party? Was the SDP's ultimate failure due to its own mistakes or due to the strength of the UK political system?

The participants considered how far the weaknesses of the SDP contributed to its lack of success. The most interesting of those that they highlighted was that the leaders of the SDP had already been defeated in the Labour Party's internal battles, and therefore were demoralised and exhausted before the new party began. Too many of its new supporters viewed it as a charity to give passive endorsement to, and not a vehicle for active participation. The SDP's lack of innovative policy is also considered. As its leaders had spent the previous decade fighting in the Labour Party, they had not had the energy to devise new ideas. It became a negative, anti-Labour Party; while its new supporters were wedded to the idea that the UK's problems could be resolved by consensual discussion, rather than fresh and radical ideas.

Fundamental to the SDP, not least because they ultimately broke it, were its relations with the Liberals. Two-thirds of the National Committee's time was occupied by this. What came across from the seminar is the depth of the contempt of most ex-Labour Social Democrats for the Liberals. A typical view was that "they were a daft party, they were badly organised, it was chaotic." Consequently, the 1983 allocation in which the Liberals fought rather more than half the seats, is seen as an unmitigated disaster, which condemned the SDP to parliamentary oblivion.

The article is therefore of great interest, especially since it places the SDP in the context of a breakaway from the Labour Party. It concludes by trying to justify the whole adventure in terms of the party's legacy within the Liberal Democrats and on the 1990s Labour Party. Especially absorbing in the light of developments since 1983 is the initial disdain for alliance with the Liberals and the extent to which many ex-Labour Social Democrats felt betrayed by Roy Jenkins' sympathies for them. This seminar is one of the first perspectives on the SDP's early history; a subject hitherto only addressed by contemporary accounts such as Hugh Stephenson's *Claret and Chips*, and as such should be read by all those interested in the formation of the SDP.